

Lessons in Shepherding 3: The Gospels

By Paul Alexander

[Editor's note: In the interest of providing pastors with good resources, or at least of pointing them toward good ideas, we are grateful to present Pastor Paul Alexander's elder training seminars for new elders. Alexander himself says that this study is dependent on and adapted from Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (IVP, 2006), and A.D. Clarke, "Leadership," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000). This issue of the *9Marks eJournal* presents the first half of Alexander's curriculum (classes 1 to 4), which exclusively focuses on the metaphor of shepherding in Scripture. In a future issue, we will present the latter half of his curriculum, which moves to the more practical aspects of eldering.]

We've been looking at the shepherding metaphor in the Bible as it's used to explain leadership among God's people. We started by looking at the paradigm shepherds in the Bible: God, Moses, and David. Our second session focused on the prophetic critiques of Ezekiel and Jeremiah leveled against bad shepherds. In this session, we will move ahead to the New Testament and focus on the shepherding metaphor in the gospels.

MARK

We begin in the Gospel of Mark. A couple of sessions ago, we read this verse: "When Jesus went ashore, he saw a large crowd, and he felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). We learned that that phrase "sheep without a shepherd" occurs in Numbers 27:17, where Moses prays near the end of his ministry, "May the Lord, the God of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep which have no shepherd." God would answer Moses' prayer in the person of Joshua. Clearly, it's a phrase about leadership.¹

In the context of Mark 6, what does Jesus feel toward the crowd? Compassion. That word for compassion in the Greek is *splag-knizomai*. It means "moved in the inward parts" or, literally, "moved in the bowels." There's a depth to his compassion. He loves them with a deep and inward concern.

Why does he feel compassion for them? Because they are like sheep without a shepherd. They have no leader, no master, no one to go before them.

How does he express compassion or concern? He teaches them many things. He doesn't become their political or military ruler. He doesn't grandstand or make himself look great, as the worldly leaders would do. He acts as their shepherd and leader first and foremost through teaching them. He goes on to meet their physical needs as well, but the first thing he does is teaches them. He feeds their souls by feeding their minds, and only after that does he feed their bodies.

¹ It also occurs in 1 Kings, where Micaiah prophesies to Ahab king of Israel about the results of Ahab's military defeat at the hands of a pagan king. "I saw Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd. And the Lord said, 'these have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace'" (1 Kings 22:17).

What does this mean for us as Christ-like shepherd-leaders? Shepherding has to do with teaching, as when God says through Jeremiah, “I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (3:15).

MATTHEW

Ruling

Aside from the clear connections between David and Jesus presented in Matthew’s chronology, Jesus is first introduced to readers of Matthew as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a coming shepherd through Herod’s enquiry about the birthplace of the Messiah:

The [chief priests and scribes] said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" (Matt 2:1-6).

Where does this quote come from in verse 6? It’s from Micah 5:2-4, which reads,

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *too* little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."...And he will arise and shepherd *his flock* in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will remain, because at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth.

To say that Jesus is the shepherd of his flock is to say that he’s a ruler. Both Matthew and Micah use the shepherding image to communicate rule or authority. He has authority to lead the flock, because he’s the one who is supposed to know where the green pastures are. And when the sheep are done feeding and are ready to come back home, he is supposed to know the way back from the wilderness to the sheep pen. He leads them out because he knows where the food is. He leads them in because he knows the way home.

Part of that ruling authority, then, is protective. He has the authority to fend off attackers, and he’s not afraid to exercise that authority for the protection of the sheep. He also has the authority to protect the sheep from themselves. The Good Shepherd won’t just sit and watch as a one sheep bullies another, or as one sheep wanders off from the safety of the flock and risks getting lost, or falling off a cliff, or getting eaten by a predator. The authority or rule of the shepherd is a *protecting, sustaining, nurturing* authority that makes courageous sacrifices for the peace and safety of the flock.

Ruling Gently

The shepherd’s authority is not to be exercised harshly or arrogantly, but with gentleness. Consider Jesus words in Matthew 11: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28). This verse doesn’t present us with a shepherding metaphor, but Jesus does approach us, and we are pictured as animals.

What are we doing by taking Jesus’ yoke on us? We’re becoming disciples, who learn from him (“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me”). The word there for learn is *manthano*, the verbal form of the Greek noun *mathatais*, or disciple. So when Jesus speaks of his relationship with us as the caretaker of a herd of animals, he links it to the idea of teaching. He comes to us as a teacher, a teacher with authority to teach.

But what attitude does Jesus take toward us? An attitude of gentleness and humility of heart. The word translated “humble of heart” is *tapeinos*, or lowly in spirit, meek. Jesus doesn’t come to us with a high-and-mighty attitude. He doesn’t lord it over us as a stern lecturer. He approaches us with the yoke of discipleship in a lowly spirit.

What does that mean for us as shepherds of God’s flock—for church elders? Gentleness and authority go together in the Chief Shepherd; so we should seek to hold them together in our leadership of the flock as well. Part of following the example of Jesus as the Chief Shepherd is learning how to mingle authority with gentleness and humility.

How do we kill pride? We should ask God to cultivate lowly spirits in us and to kill our pride. We should also serve just like Jesus served, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:7-8). Humble teaching and servanthood is the model of spiritual leadership that Jesus sets for his under-shepherds. That’s our goal. We want to be—and known by the congregation *as*—men who are lowly in spirit and gentle at heart, who teach God’s word with a spiritual authority that comes from God, an authority that’s not rooted in our personalities or techniques, but that’s derived from speaking his word faithfully. That’s how we should express our love and compassion for the congregation – the same way Jesus expressed his. As Jesus’ under-shepherds, we are called to lead the congregation to put on the yoke of discipleship to Jesus Christ to learn from him.

Commissioning Under-shepherds

When we turn to Matthew 9, we find the parallel passage to Mark 6:34, but with a little more detail.

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest" (Matt 9:35-38).

What is the attitude of the crowd here? Distressed (*skullō*—troubled, annoyed; skinned or flayed) and dispirited (*riptō*—thrown down, tossed around; same word used in Luke 4:35 for a demon throwing a boy to the ground). Jesus sees that they have no peace. They may be annoyed or even scared, and they seem to be treated carelessly. They lack anyone to care for them. As in Mark

6:34, they're like sheep without a shepherd. But here Jesus' reaction is different. What does he do here? He doesn't teach them himself. He commands the disciples to pray that workers would be sent into the harvest. Jesus delegates some of his shepherding authority to his disciples. The workers will be the ones who will bring in the harvest. And this is confirmed in the very next chapter, where Jesus formally charges his disciples with doing the work of shepherding.

Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness" (Matt. 10:1)

This is what Jesus was doing in 9:35 – healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Jesus' work becomes their work – he welcomes them into his mission and gives them a task.

Sharing in His Suffering

But a few verses later he tells them,

I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

What does that warning communicate about the nature of the disciples' work? It was dangerous, and it would involve suffering. Jesus intentionally sent them as sheep into the middle of a wolf pack. They will be betrayed, handed over to the authorities, interrogated, and scourged (vv.17-18). They should expect to be betrayed by their families, even to the point of execution (v.21). They should expect to be hated on account of Jesus' name (v.22). But all this will be for the progress of the gospel—"for My sake," Jesus says, "as a testimony to [the governors and kings] and to the Gentiles" (Matt. 10:18).

The point is that the call to shepherding is a call to suffering. Being sent out as workers into the harvest—being sent by the Great Shepherd to do his work of gathering and caring for the sheep—is a call to suffer. The call to Christian discipleship, and the call to working as an under-shepherd of Jesus Christ, are both calls to self-sacrifice and to exposing yourself to all sorts of pain and loss in this world.

Taking Responsibility For All

In addition to facing the suffering of Christ, Jesus' under-shepherd's shoulder the responsibility of taking responsibility for every sheep in the fold. Telling a parable about a lost sheep, Jesus says,

If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish (Matt 18:12-14).

This passage is an answer to the disciples' question in verse 1 of chapter 18 about who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus answers by reversing their idea of greatness. In verse 3, he says they will have to become like children, the most powerless people of all, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. In verse 10, he tells them not to despise the children, and then he sums up the parable of the lost sheep by saying the Father doesn't want even one of his little ones to perish.

What do you think that says about Jesus view of his role as the Shepherd of his people? He knows he is responsible for every one of them, individually. He's concerned about the weakest and smallest, not just the strongest and most productive. He seeks out the individual strays. So must the elders of Christ's churches.

Exercising Judgment

If you keep reading in your Bible beyond this parable, you find Jesus turning in the very next paragraph to the subject of church discipline. Corrective church discipline, interestingly, is one means of seeking a strayed sheep. When a church excludes a member for unrepentant sin, it makes the stray's status explicit, or clear, thus presenting the stray with an opportunity to be restored. At the very least it will protect the flock by exposing one who is actually a goat or a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This authority of the local church to judge those within the flock (see 1 Cor. 5:12) is a foretaste of God's judgment between the sheep and the goats on the last day. As Jesus proclaimed,

But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with Him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and he will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and he will put the sheep on his right, and the goats on the left (Matt 25:31-32).

God reserves for himself the prerogative of the ultimate separation between those who are in the flock and those who are not. But he gives the local church authority to exercise corrective discipline, and when it comes to putting someone out of the church, the elders lead the whole church in taking that action together. That's why Paul exhorts the church in Corinth to "remove the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor. 5:12).

LUKE

Our look at the Gospel of Luke will be very brief. In chapter 15, Luke presents the parallel account of a parable we saw in Matthew 18. It's worth meditating one more time.

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends

and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:1-7).

Does this text describe our desire as elders to see God do a great work of conversion among us and our community? Are we praying as elders for a move of God's Spirit among us to do his gathering work of conversion through this church? What keeps us from praying this way?

JOHN

Guarding, Knowing, and Gathering

John's Gospel presents us with some of the most extended and beautiful statements about Jesus as our Good Shepherd. As Jesus says in chapter 10,

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:11-18).

Which aspects of the Good Shepherd's character and responsibility stand out here? First, in contrast to the hired hand, the good shepherd is concerned about the sheep. He's so concerned for them, in fact, that he's willing to lay down his life for the sheep. He's not afraid or reticent to sacrifice himself for the good of his sheep. He sacrifices himself particularly in the service of protecting the sheep from wolves. He lays his life on the line to protect the sheep. He sacrifices himself uniquely in giving his life as a ransom for theirs.

Second, he knows his sheep. He knows which sheep are his, he knows the condition of his flock, and his flock recognizes his voice and follows him with willing trust.

Third, he gathers his flock together and keeps them together. One flock with one shepherd. The ideal is that the flock remains together.

What does all this mean for us as Christ's under-shepherds? First, it means we are called to *guard* the flock. We need to be on the lookout for wolves and cultivate in our hearts a willingness to protect the flock from them, even to our own hurt. We need to pray that God would plant and grow in us a loving and protective concern for the condition of the sheep and for their safety from wolves who teach false doctrine and practice.

Second, as shepherds, we need to work hard at *knowing* the sheep and making sure that they know us. The good shepherd isn't aloof from his sheep. Being a good under-shepherd involves more than just attending a regular elder meetings. It means moving among the congregation in a particular way. We should be engaged with people as much as God enables us to be. Some of us will be better at this than others, initiating with people for their spiritual good. It will look different for shepherd to shepherd. But we all need to work hard at getting to know the sheep.

Let me offer two further implications of this second task. Working hard to know which particular sheep God has entrusted to our care means taking local church membership seriously. We must therefore be careful about how we admit members into the flock, and we must be careful about how we see members out of the flock. Also, knowing the flock means knowing both the condition of particular sheep and the condition of the flock as a whole. Don't rush out after church services, but linger and chat. Call people throughout the week. Offer hospitality as often as you can.

Third, Christ's under-shepherds must know how to *gather* the flock. We want to keep the flock together. It's dangerous for sheep to wander off on their own. It's always best for sheep to remain together. At least two implications follow. To begin with, we can keep the flock together by working our way back to a single Sunday morning service rather than dividing the congregation so that many of them never worship and feed with one another. Also, we want to promote the right kind of peace among the congregation by quelling disputes among the sheep, by making sure that the stronger don't abuse the weaker, by making sure that our teaching and leadership promote the right kind of peaceful unity, and by making sure that the service of the deacons promotes the right kind of peaceful unity.

Stewarding, Feeding, Self-Sacrificing

John's most dramatic statement of Jesus' commissioning of his under-shepherds must be Jesus call on Peter to feed his sheep. We read,

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" he said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." he said to him, "Tend My lambs." he said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" he said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." he said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." he said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." Now this he said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he said to him, "Follow Me!" Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on his bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" So Peter seeing him said to

Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" (John 21:15-22).

The governing verb for Jesus' command to tend or shepherd is the Greek word *boskō*, which means more specifically to feed.

Whose sheep does Jesus command Peter to feed? Jesus' sheep. Jesus will still own the sheep. Peter doesn't own them. He is simply commissioned to feed and care for them as an under-shepherd accountable to the Owner Shepherd.

What is the relationship between love for Christ and feeding his sheep? Feeding Jesus' sheep is the particular way that Jesus wanted Peter to love *him*. As a shepherd of God's people, Jesus wanted Peter to feed Jesus' sheep as the evidence and outworking of Peter's love for Jesus. That's how closely Jesus identifies with his people. He does a similar thing with Paul in Acts 9, when he tells Saul that in persecuting the church, he is persecuting Jesus himself: "Saul, why are you persecuting [not my people, but] Me?" And Saul said, 'who are you, Lord?' And Jesus said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:4-5) Twice in these verses in Acts Jesus identifies himself with his sheep. The same identification occurs in John 21, yet here Jesus identifies with the opposite kind of treatment of the sheep. In Acts 9, Jesus views himself as persecuted when his people are persecuted; in John 21, he views himself as loved when his people are loved (see also Matt 25:35-40).

What does this mean for us as under-shepherds of Jesus Christ? First, we must remember that we are merely *stewards*. We are accountable to Jesus for how we shepherd and feed his sheep. He is the owner-shepherd, we are the under-shepherds (Heb 13:17). So we must work hard to give practical care and doctrinal instruction wherever it's needed, and doing everything God enables us to do to present every person complete in Christ (Col 1:29).

Second, Christ's charge to Peter reminds elders that we need to *feed* the sheep. That may look different for a preaching elder like me and a non-staff elder. For a non-staff elder, feeding the sheep may occur by initiating regular one-on-one discipling relationships over breakfast or coffee or lunch, or leading a Bible Study in your home, or teaching a Sunday School class, or inviting singles or young married couples into your home for dinner and spiritual conversation, or being a person who is known in the congregation as easily approachable for biblical counsel and prayer. Whatever it looks like in your life, Jesus' charge to Peter will be something that drives you. Your heart is anxious to feed others, whatever opportunities God might give.

Having said that, it should also involve occasionally preaching in front of the whole congregation, in some service or another. A congregation can become unnecessarily narrow by only listening to one preacher, no matter who that is. I want our own congregation to be exposed to the teaching of other elders. It breaks up the monotony of hearing my voice in every single service, and it lets the flock see other men handling the word faithfully. It gives them the benefit of learning from someone else's sanctified thought and labor in the text. And it gives the elders an opportunity to sharpen and expand eldering skills. Part of elder training must be experience in formally feeding the sheep from the pulpit.

Third, Christ's charge to Peter reminds elders of the call to *personal sacrifice*. Jesus was not simply calling Peter to an easy life in the country. He was calling Peter to the cross. Pastoral ministry involves dying to ourselves and our flesh, our laziness, our pride, our sense of entitlement. It's a call to grow in our willingness to make personal sacrifices for the good of the sheep as an expression of our love and loyalty to the Owner-Shepherd.

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